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THE NOMINATING PRIMARY

BY WILLIAM THOMAS LAPRADE

THE direct nominating primary has been adopted in one form or another in many States; and, in view of the President's annual message, there seems to be a probability that an attempt will be made to give it a nation-wide extent in the matter of selecting Presidential candidates. This innovating party device finds such a ready acceptance with progressive statesmen and politicians of the present day that it is with some hesitation one makes bold to take the unpopular side. Nevertheless, when so radical a departure from old customs is proposed, it is worth while to ask several questions concerning the defects in the old device and the soundness and efficacy of the new.

In the first place, let us consider whether the primary is inherently a better device for making nominations and framing party platforms than a convention. A political party is, or ought to be, a group of individuals who are agreed on certain questions which they deem to be of sufficient importance to justify each of them in yielding the idiosyncrasies of his personal opinions in order to support the common views. Before a party can have organic existence and become an efficient fighting unit these common views must be agreed upon and formulated, and a leader must be chosen. The purpose for which a political party exists, then, is to enable its members, even at the cost of compromise on subordinate questions, to agree upon a programme that offers some prospect of being attainable, and to select for united support the candidate who seems most likely to lead to a successful issue in their efforts to put that programme into effect. A nominating convention is presumably composed of representative and experienced men of more than average ability and intelligence. Its mem-

bers, acting in a representative capacity, meet to consult with each other with a view to ascertaining conditions throughout the extent of the political unit involved. It seems on the surface tolerably certain that such a body of men after consultation, if not so numerous as to be unwieldy or so small as to be unrepresentative, would be much better able to frame a party programme and select a party candidate than would all the members of the party acting together. In the first place, the average citizen, if called upon, would find it difficult to formulate his political creed in a manner that would obtain for it a very wide acceptance. But, were each citizen able to formulate his own views, there is no conceivable political device, other than one based on some form of representation, which would enable a group of citizens sufficiently large to constitute a party to compromise upon views held in common. Yet such a compromise is absolutely necessary if political parties are to exist at all.

The President, in his recommendation of a Presidential primary, avoids this difficulty by suggesting that conventions may still be held to frame party platforms. Even so. But half the task of winning an election consists in finding a candidate who represents in his personal character the spirit of the prevailing views of his party, however imperfectly they may be expressed in the formal party platform. The choice of such a candidate is a matter for mature deliberation, in the light of all the available information, by intelligent, well-informed men, rather than for the uninformed decision of the unthinking mass of voters. There is no better illustration of this point than the case of the President himself. It is now generally agreed that he is the most competent and representative leader of his party who could have been selected. Yet he has to remember that it was not a popular primary, but the Baltimore convention, far from ideal as that body admittedly was for the high functions it exercised, which made him the nominee of his party for the position he now holds. On the other hand, as far as we may judge from the primaries that were actually held, he would have lacked much of becoming the nominee had the method of nomination he now advocates then obtained. It is reasonable, admitting an equality of good intentions, that a select, representative group will be more likely to reach a wise decision than a larger number

of less well-informed and well-qualified persons. Else of what avail is intelligence and experience? We conclude, therefore, that a representative convention, not too large or too small, would be likely to attain better results than could be reached by all the members of a party acting together under any device which has yet been suggested.

There is another point in favor of the nominating convention. It is composed, after all, of delegates, and the final decision still rests with those for whom they are acting. If the delegates do their work well their candidate and platform merit and ought to have the support of their constituents. But if the constituents feel that a delegate has betrayed their principles, they are free to withdraw temporarily or permanently from the party and to support another candidate who more nearly represents their views. This is the check that makes the delegate a true representative. Moreover, in this way a voter can participate in the party organization and yet retain an essential part of his political independence. The direct nominating primary leaves room for no such wholesome possibility. It is difficult to see why it would not be as justifiable for a citizen in the minority to refuse to accept the measures imposed by a majority of his fellow-citizens in the nation at large as it would for a participant in a primary to refuse to support the nominee chosen by the members of his party voting directly. But, if we admit this principle, there would seem to be little use for an election where all parties are compelled to hold legalized primaries.

Furthermore, if primaries are held where the parties are at all equally supported, it necessarily follows that the official ultimately elected is in a majority of cases the first choice of a minority of the voters. Where three parties of considerable strength exist the official chosen might very well be the choice of a very small proportion of the voters. Let us examine a possible case. According to the apportionment under the census of 1910, there are in the average Congressional District in the United States about forty thousand voters. Let us grant that each of the three political parties has something near the same strength in a district, and that the successful candidate is elected by a plurality of a thousand votes. He would require only fourteen thousand votes all told. Now let us assume that there were three candidates before the primary which selected

the successful candidate to lead his party, and that the vote in the primary was reasonably close. The winner would require only five thousand votes to give him a plurality of five hundred over his opponents. Thus the man finally selected would be the first choice of only one-eighth of his constituents. Moreover, the chances are that the candidate ultimately selected would represent the group that held together most solidly, regardless of the general sentiment of a majority of the members of the party in the district. This group would probably be composed either of professional politicians and their henchmen or of ultra-radical enthusiasts, since these two classes of voters would be more likely to attend a primary in force than others. Nor is this example an unfair illustration of what would take place in very many cases under a legalized primary. Indeed, should the number of candidates exceed three, the successful nominee might very frequently be the choice of even a smaller minority of the voters.

It cannot be pleaded that the subsequent elections would afford an opportunity for defeating the undesirable nominees of primaries. In the first place, as we noted above, the man who would refuse to support the nominee of a primary in which he had taken part would be a sort of revolutionist or anarchist. Revolutions may be necessary and defensible under exceptional conditions, but it would seem to be ill-advised to adopt deliberately a system of government which would invite and encourage revolution. But the nominee of the opposition party under the primary system would probably not often be of such a character as to win the support of a voter who was displeased at the choice of his own party. There are two political groups that exist to a greater or a less degree in all parties in almost every community, and one of these groups would select the candidate in a party primary in almost every case in which there was opposition. One of these groups is controlled by professional politicians who are primarily seeking to advance their own personal interests in one form or another, and no party has a monopoly of persons of this sort. The other group is composed of individuals who may be termed ultra-radicals, persons who hold views to which the majority of conservative opinion in the community has not yet assented. The first of these groups would always take part in a primary and would usually concentrate its strength on some one

candidate. This group would naturally have the most efficient organization, since its members would have a greater immediate practical interest in the outcome than any other group. The second group, the radicals, being enthusiasts by nature, would, under ordinary circumstances, be more likely than any other to rival the professional politicians in efficiency of organization and in the positive activity necessary to command support. In a majority of cases one of these two factions would probably select the candidates of all parties; and, in either case, the candidate selected would not correctly represent the views of the unorganized, sane, conservative majority of substantial citizens. The legalized primary, therefore, seems calculated to put the reins of government into the hands either of professional politicians or of advocates of various radical departures from the existing order. In any case, it is a cumbrous device, ill adapted to the task of selecting the most available party candidates and of formulating a programme that would approximate to the consensus of partisan opinion.

The truth is that the nominating primary is a departure from our traditional, representative system of government. If the candidates are to be selected by a direct vote, the platforms ought also to be submitted to a partisan referendum. And in that case it would be illogical not to provide a place for the initiative, as well, in the internal party government. Certainly nobody but the wildest democratic enthusiast would advocate such a scheme. Yet the nominating primary has widespread support, in spite of the fact that the selection of a candidate and the formulation of a platform are equally tasks for competent and experienced hands.

But there must be something wrong with the nominating convention. What are the defects, from the point of view of the supporters of the primary, which make the abandonment of the convention so imperative? Perhaps a consideration of these defects will enable us to understand the favor with which the primary is now received. In the first place, however, it is well to note that the soundness of the theory of the nominating convention is seldom or never disputed. In truth, the reformers are usually so much occupied with the obvious evils which have grown up in the working of the convention system that a fundamental question like this is almost invariably ignored. Since these undeniable evils have arisen, the supporters of the primary reason that the

convention system itself must be at fault. Instead of seeking a diagnosis of the disease and a remedy for the patient they would have us take the life of the convention system forthwith and substitute the primary, a device which, as we have seen, is not without its shortcomings in theory and which may develop other defects in practice. It would seem to be the part of wisdom at least to give the convention system a hearing before dismissing it in such a summary fashion. It is pertinent, therefore, to inquire into the nature of the defects in the convention which the primary is designed to remedy.

In the first place, it is alleged that under the convention system "bosses" have been able to dominate the parties, to name the candidates, and to frame the platforms. The nominating primary, by restoring the power to the individual members of the party, is to rid the country of "bosses." A "boss," in the parlance of present-day reformers, seems to be a professional politician who exerts himself to control the government of his community in order that he may promote his own private interest. There are usually associated with him a group of henchmen with similar views and aims. This group has a very obvious reason for acting together and a correspondingly stronger reason for compromising minor differences of opinion than have citizens who act from loftier motives. However great a lack of interest the citizens at large may manifest in political questions, the professional politician will share none of this apathy. It is a matter that concerns his daily bread. For that reason he has in the past been willing to spend both time and money in order that he might have influence in nominating conventions. It was by such means he hoped to find reward in the spoils of office. In a like manner, for the same reasons, the "boss" will seek to influence the results of nominating primaries. And the view we have taken of primaries will have to be proved entirely without foundation, or one would have to be more of an optimist than existing political conditions justify to imagine that the boss will not as easily dominate the primary as he has the convention.

We are told, in the second place, that large corporations and men of great wealth have been able to control nominating conventions and thereby to impose on political parties policies that were in the interest of favored business organizations rather than for the advantage of the whole

people. Doubtless such things have been done many times in the past under the convention system. And these same corporations and men of great wealth, unless in the mean time they experience a change of heart, will quite likely attempt to influence primaries in a similar manner; and he is an optimist indeed who believes that under existing conditions they will not succeed in their undertaking. The necessary money cost may be greater, and the manipulation required may be of a more complicated sort. But if the interest of the business organizations seems to justify the effort it will doubtless be made, and with every prospect of success.

What, then, are the alleged advantages of the nominating primary over the convention? It is not unfair to say that the primary is represented by its advocates as a sort of patent medicine for curing political ills. It is an automatic device for taking political power out of the hands of the financial interests and the professional politicians and restoring it to the people at large. The trouble is that social, like bodily, diseases are seldom benefited by such easy remedies, and the machinery of a self-governing state is not adapted to the use of automatic devices. Granted that the nominating primary is a political device sound in theory, it will not work in practice unless the people develop sufficient interest in public questions to cause them to go to the polls regularly and cast their votes intelligently. Granted the last condition, and there does not seem to be a very good reason why a nominating convention would not work as well or even better than a primary.

After all, the "bosses" and the "interests" have dominated our party conventions in the past for one of two reasons. Either they have represented the wishes of a majority of the people; in which case, according to the principle on which our government is established, they ought to have triumphed. Else they have been able to dominate our politics because a majority of citizens were too busy with their own affairs or too heedless of the welfare of the State to assert their rightful voice in shaping the character of their government. The preponderance of evidence seems to be in favor of the latter view. What we need, therefore, is not a device for rendering the duties of citizenship less onerous. The trouble is not with the "bosses" and the corrupt business organizations, but rather with the respectable citi-

zens who shirk their duties. The situation demands an awakening of the average citizen to a consciousness of his privileges and powers as well as of his obligations to himself and to the community in which he lives. He needs to learn anew that on his shoulders rest the responsibilities of government. If this class of citizens had sufficient practical patriotism to cause them to attend nominating conventions they could name any candidate and formulate any platform they pleased. Until their conscience is quickened the reins of party government will rest in the hands of those whose interests cause them to lay hold of them. The need is for a political revival and a very practical sort of political education rather than for an automatic device to make self-government easier. The truth is that the movement in behalf of primaries is a disadvantage in solving this fundamental problem of education in as far as the primary is represented as a device calculated to make it more difficult for men with selfish interests to get control of the government. The citizen is to that extent led into a false sense of security and, therefore, takes even less trouble than before about the government of his party.

Now it does not follow from all of this that the nominating convention, as it exists to-day, is not itself an imperfect contrivance or that some of its imperfections may not be remedied. Certainly some of our conventions in the past have been so large that they were unwieldy and, consequently, have not been workable deliberative bodies. This defect has probably arisen from a mistaken effort to make the convention more representative in character by making its membership more numerous. But that is a difficulty easily remedied. It is probable, also, that a better system of selecting delegates to conventions than is now customarily practised could be devised. There is much to be said in favor of electing the delegates to a nominating convention in a definitely prescribed election participated in by the members of the party. The delegate so chosen would represent to a certain degree the prevailing sentiments of a majority of his constituents. However, the sole duty of a delegate so elected would be to attend the convention and consult with his colleagues in an effort to name the most available candidate for his party and to formulate the programme for which it seemed right to stand. This task completed, the work of the delegate would be over, and it would be for his constituents

as individuals to decide whether it had been well or ill done and to cast their votes accordingly. To vote against the nominee of a convention to which you helped to send a delegate would be quite a different thing from voting against the nominee of a primary in which the candidate you supported for the nomination had been defeated.

But the main point, and the one on which the political reformers of to-day put too little emphasis, is that no political contrivance will insure good government to a self-governed community unless the better class of citizens have sufficient patriotism to cause them to take the trouble necessary in exercising the prerogatives of citizenship.

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